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‘We’re as good as anybody else’: a comparative study of working-class university students’ experiences in England and Ireland

Fergal Finnegan^{a*} and Barbara Merrill^b

^a*Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland;* ^b*Centre for Lifelong Learning, Warwick University, Coventry, UK*

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This article is based on a comparative study of working-class students’ experiences in English and Irish higher education. It highlights the lack of comparative studies on this topic based on qualitative research and why filling this gap is important in understanding access and widening participation. Drawing on biographical interviews with 139 people in a range of elite and non-elite institutions, the article discusses similarities as well as some differences between the data from the two countries in terms of class, identity and how working-class students view and value higher education. It maps out how the research relates to recent debates over social class and outlines the theoretical implications of these findings.

Keywords: widening participation; higher education; biographical research; identity; working-class students

Introduction

While Ireland and England are very distinct societies with their own specific histories and patterns of class formation, they nevertheless share a tangled common past, many cultural connections and have broadly similar educational systems. One of the most obvious commonalities is the persistence of high levels of class inequality in education. Both states have sought to address this through access and widening participation policies in higher education (HE) which describe working-class students as a key ‘target’ group. These policies are underpinned by findings from national and cross-national quantitative research on the highly uneven educational participation rates of various socio-economic groups. Remarkably, however, there is almost no comparative qualitative research on working-class students’ experience in Irish and English HE. Drawing on in-depth qualitative research conducted in these two countries, this article seeks to bridge this

*Corresponding author. Email: Fergal.Finnegan@nuim.ie

empirical gap by offering a comparative analysis of how working-class students discuss class and HE.

The article will first briefly outline the theoretical, methodological and policy background to our research. This begins with a discussion of how we view recent debates over the saliency and meaning of class and why, theoretically and politically, we believe conducting research on working-class experience is important. We shall then turn to the topic of class and education, and specifically to trends in working-class participation in HE in Ireland and England. Following this we will explain in more detail our rationale for using biographical methods and doing cross-national comparative work on this topic.

Doing this will contextualise the empirical findings detailed in the second half of the article which have emerged from a number of research projects examining working-class students' experience in third-level education, and especially on data from the European research project 'Retention and Access: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in HE' (RANLHE) (Finnegan, Merrill, and Thunborg 2014). In particular, the article will focus on how working-class students discuss class and identity, how this relates to their experiences in HE and how they talk about the expected and actual transitions that occur for them in Irish and English universities. The article will conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings.

Positioning our research within debates over class

Social class analysis – once the dominant, and arguably one of the defining, concerns of sociology – became much rarer between the 1980s and late 1990s in the wake of a series of enormous socio-political changes. The reorganisation of production and work, the dismal failure of the Soviet experiment and the rise of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Sayer and Walker 1992) contributed, at least in the Global North, to the precipitous decline of organised working-class politics and the emergence of a more individualised society (Beck 1992). Besides this, over the past 40 years the ideas produced by feminists and other participants in 'new' social movements have challenged egalitarians to re-examine power relations, to acknowledge the lacunae and limitations of much class analysis and to rethink the bases of emancipatory critique (Wainwright 1994). The cumulative effect of these socio-political shifts has been that the whole project of class analysis has been put under sustained critical scrutiny (Savage 2000). In the academy this can be linked to the emergence of postmodernism and the denunciation of 'grand narratives' which had a major effect on educational scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s where social class was 'decentred' in studies of inequality. While we are in no sense postmodernists – and the term at any rate now seems very dated – we do believe that this period of crisis and critical reflection generated new and valuable insights into the complex nature of class and

class identities and the layered nature of social power in contemporary society.

But many academics, such as Pahl (1989), went much further and claimed that class had become an entirely outmoded concept. But despite the clamour about 'the death of class', large-scale quantitative studies indicated that class structures remain highly durable (Breen 2004; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Wright 1997). In fact, the evidence has steadily mounted that inequality in wealth and ownership has become much more severe over the past four decades (Harvey 2005; Sayer 2015). This has been facilitated by the increased mobility and financialisation of capital, which has led to a massive redistribution of wealth upwards and further undermined the capacity for democratic decision-making from 'below' (Harvey 2005; Mellor 2011). Weakened trade unions and the erosion of social welfare guarantees paved the way for new forms of marginalisation, increased precarity and the demonisation of the poorest sections of the working class (Wacquant 2009). As the post-war social democratic compromise unravelled, a new form of elite class politics asserted itself which promoted the idea 'that when people do not surmount class barriers, they can be positioned as lacking in some way' (Lawler 2005, 798).

These conditions have led to a renewal of scholarship on class. Understanding class properly in the light of these socio-political changes requires working on a variety of levels of analysis and also some circumspection. Ownership over the means of production, distribution, consumption and exchange remain key sources of social power. But we also have to be alert to the cultural, social and symbolic dimensions of class domination (Bourdieu 1984). Feminists and post-colonial critics have pointed out this means grasping how ethnicity and gender intersect with, reinforce and modify class inequalities. As a result of this complexity we are wary of theories that assume a clear and necessary relationship between class positions and 'typical' forms of class consciousness and identity. Instead we are interested in investigating how class shapes embodied experience and practical sense. This is especially important in a time of flux and heightened inequality when the lived experience of class and the meanings given to this experience are changing. Obviously political economy and data on wealth, employment and social mobility are necessary elements of class analysis, but this needs to be supplemented with other forms of research which explore people's own accounts of their lives and concerns to grasp the interplay of class structures and human agency. In this sense, our work is part of a broader shift in contemporary work on class, identity and education which is based on a synthesis of feminist, radical and critical sociology (Reay 2003; Savage 2000; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997). We think such an approach offers the basis for a more robust and realistic form of class analysis.

Working-class participation in higher education: exclusion, widening participation and new aspirations

There is an enormous body of scholarship which has repeatedly demonstrated the effect of social class on students' experience, trajectories and outcomes right across the education system. Historically these inequalities have been particularly stark in third-level education. Certainly in the United Kingdom before 1963 universities were the almost exclusive preserve of the middle and upper classes, and it was only following the Robbins Report of that year (Committee on Higher Education 1963) that the doors of the academy were opened, however narrowly, to the working class. Since the 1990s widening participation policies have further increased the number of working-class students entering university, but statistics indicate that they are not spread evenly across the system. David et al. (2009) point out through their research that while widening participation has occurred in the United Kingdom, access to HE is not equal; and as a whole the university student population remains largely middle class, with about one-third being working class (HESA 2009). Most working-class students are found in the post-1992 institutions, where in many they consist of over 50% of the student population compared with below 15% in most of the Russell Group universities.

In the Republic of Ireland the modernisation of HE also began in the 1960s but the expansion of HE into a 'mass' system only really gathered momentum in the 1980s (Raftery and Hout 1993). Throughout this period of growth, people from professional, managerial and farming backgrounds have consistently had much higher participation rates than people from working-class families (Clancy and Wall 2000). As in the UK, there was a shift in the 1990s owing to further expansion and changes in legislation and educational policies. Access became a centrepiece in HE policy and working-class students began to enter universities in quite substantial numbers for the first time (Clancy and Wall 2000; HEA 2008; NOEAHE 2010; O'Connell 2005). The effect of this has been uneven but in certain respects quite dramatic. For instance, in some working-class communities in Dublin participation rates doubled between 1998 and 2004, and overall there has been a significant rise in people from the skilled working class in HE (O'Connell 2005). But nevertheless, class continues to exert a massive influence on who enters third-level education in Ireland, widening participation targets have not been met and there has even been a decline in the numbers of people from routine non-manual backgrounds (NOEAHE 2010). There is also clear evidence of sectoral differentiation into elite and non-elite disciplines and institutions (Finnegan, Merrill, and Thunborg 2014).

On a macro level we discern a similar, and somewhat paradoxical, pattern in both countries: longstanding social class inequalities in power and wealth have been intensified through a neoliberal reconfiguration of the relationship between the market and the state, but in the same period access

to HE for working-class students has widened albeit in a rather uneven manner. There is an interesting convergence in the way policy changes in England and Ireland are discursively framed as well. Education has assumed a new prominence and is seen as source of economic growth and a motor of social progress. Both states have embraced a version of the idea of life-long learning which links access to HE to social inclusion and the enhancement of human capital in a marketised 'knowledge economy'. In analysing this, however, we think it is important to hold on to the complexity of recent shifts. While there can be little doubt that human capital and neoliberal ideas are hegemonic in Ireland and England, it is also worth bearing in mind that the demand for more equal access to education also reflects deeply rooted democratic and egalitarian tendencies in society (Carnoy and Levin 1985) and it is a mistake to treat access, and the expectations and aspirations that accompany such policies, simply as ideological 'cover' or to depict these changes as just the inevitable unfolding of the logic of social reproduction.

It is pertinent to both the theoretical claims we are making and the empirical data detailed below that as a result of these shifts HE appears to have become a different type of symbolic and social space. It is a liminal zone: a space of imagined and actual transitions. Our data suggest that this is an international phenomenon. In more individualised and unequal societies, HE is often perceived by working-class students as an 'in-between' space, however temporary, for reflection, individual agency and creativity. As Reay notes, 'growing numbers of the working classes are caught up in education [...] as an escape, as a project from maximising and fulfilling the self or complicated mixture of the two' (2001, 336). But this frequently takes place within institutions that remain very traditional in their ideas and practices. So the dominant culture in HE – which is still largely middle class – continues to be very different from, and often at odds with, the emergent and residual cultures brought to HE by working-class students who now constitute a significant proportion of the student body. Consequently we want to argue that expansion and widening participation in Ireland and England since the 1990s – in terms of class and equality – has made HE a more contradictory space with dynamics and tensions which are poorly described using traditional accounts of social reproduction or as a process of modernisation linked to the 'optimal' use of human capital. For this reason it is necessary to attend very carefully to how students discuss their own experience, how they view class and identity, and how they manage these tensions and contradictions

Class and biographical research

Yet in the Republic of Ireland, and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom, quantitative research (especially neo-Weberian stratification

theory) still completely dominates how class and education get discussed in policy and academic research. While this work is valuable for mapping out broad trends in participation and patterns of occupational change, it does not have the methodological or theoretical tools to explore the complex, layered nature of working-class student experience and all the varied dimensions of class inequality.

This is why, alongside the other larger socio-political shifts discussed, we feel the use of biographical research methods is particularly appropriate for exploring the topic of class in HE. This is part of a broader change within the social sciences, and particularly in adult education research, where there has been a ‘biographical turn’ (Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000) as part of a reaction against the positivistic view of the world. Instead it prefers a subjective and humanistic approach (Plummer 2001) using open, participant-led interviews to understand people’s lives. This offers especially ‘rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other’ (Merrill and West 2009, 1). Participants are viewed as central to the research process and, influenced by feminist tradition, we seek to break down the power relationships between the researcher and the researched so that the interview becomes more like a conversation and participants’ stories are treated as completely integral to social inquiry (Oakley 1981). Biographical narratives, as feminists point out, have – potentially at least – the power to give voice to those who are marginalised and oppressed in society. They highlight the complexity in people’s lives and how identities are shaped and changed over time. They also enable ‘respondents to reflect upon, interpret, give meaning to and construct past events and experiences within a social context’ (Crossan et al. 2003, 38). Although a biography is an individual life story, when several people are interviewed the collective nature of experiences (class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and the interplay between structure and agency in the making of identity are illuminated (Merrill 2007).

Why compare data from Ireland and England?

While educational research in a national context is the norm, we think a great deal can be learnt by comparing stories and theoretical frameworks across borders and contexts. This is perhaps especially true for educational research dealing with class. Historically one of the weaknesses of class analysis in general has been the uncritical acceptance of the nation-state as an unproblematic or ‘natural’ unit of analysis when class relations are only truly comprehensible as part of a ‘world system’ (Marx 1990; Wallerstein 1980). But class experience and processes of class formation occur in very particular ways across specific parts of this system and developing a nuanced transnational understanding of class and education depends on

puzzling out the significance of differences and similarities between nations and regions.

Some comparative work on England and Ireland has been done by educational historians, in policy reviews and in quantitative international surveys. When it comes to the sort of research we are interested in pursuing – that is, comparative work on how working class students in HE make sense of their experience – there is a notable dearth of relevant studies. The nearest we can find to this type of work is when scholars have attempted to integrate the findings of Irish research in their analysis (that is, Hutchings and Archer's [2001] use of Lynch and Riordan [1998]). This is remarkable given the proximity of England and the Republic of Ireland, the shared language and the homologies between the education systems.

Our comparative work began on the European research project RANLHE, which looked at access and retention in relation to non-traditional students in HE. Over a period of five years, clear thematic similarities emerged from the data on class from England and Ireland and this intrigued us, especially as this was not always the case when we discussed findings with other European partners (e.g. with our Swedish colleagues). Findings were illustrated through detailed individual biographical accounts and a shared theoretical framework was slowly built around this empirical material. RANLHE is the largest data source for this shared work but we have also used interviews from other research projects and have used this to develop a dialogue over the broader theoretical significance of the patterns in this material. The Irish data used for this paper are based on an analysis of 81 in-depth, biographical interviews conducted with 51 people of all ages in various HE institutions gathered between 2007 and 2012. Forty-three of the students were working class and a middle-class cohort was included for comparative analysis. Twenty-eight of the total cohort were mature students and 33 were women. Seven were from minority ethnic backgrounds or were migrants. The English research is based on 88 people (younger and adult students), most of whom were women. The research in both countries was conducted in a range of elite and non-elite HE institutions.

Empirical findings

The main aim of the article is to offer a broad overview of what we discovered from this comparative work and to outline some of the theoretical implications of this for researching class and education. In the future we will build on this work using more detailed case studies which allow us to explore some of nuances and complexities of individual accounts in greater detail. Here, however, we want to highlight the most prominent themes from the data which offer some insight into the many overlaps and some differences between working-class students' experiences in HE in England and Ireland. Specifically we will outline the following:

1. How the participants discussed class experience and class identity.
2. Belonging and dislocation and the differentiation of HE.
3. How the students view the value and purpose of HE.

Class and identity

One of the major shibboleths of traditional class analysis was the idea that collective experience led to fairly straightforward types of class identification. Empirically this has long been disputed (Eley 2002; Mann 1973), and at any rate political movements, postmodern theorising and socio-economic changes have transformed the contours of the debates over identity since then: collective notions of identity have been largely replaced by discussions of individualisation in detraditionalised and highly fluid societies (Beck 1992). Yet as Ferguson (2009) asserts, identities are always in some sense collective and are shaped by social, personal and institutional processes (see also Jenkins 2000). Our research suggests that class is an important aspect of one's identity and that class experiences impact in a very significant way on how we reflexively view our biography (past, present and future) and our place in society. But the relationship between class and identity is neither deterministic nor static. As Berger and Luckmann argue, 'identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society' (1973, 195). We think the interplay between personal and collective dimensions of identity is sociologically very important, and in presenting our findings we want to foreground this and map out how students (re)construct class identities through education.

In Ireland, where the organised working class has been quite weak and 'Irish society is often thought of as a classless society' (Share, Tovey, and Corcoran 2007, 170), it might be imagined that people would not use explicit class designations at all. In fact, one-third of people interviewed spontaneously chose to describe themselves in class terms – mainly as 'working class' but also 'disadvantaged' and 'not posh'. Such self-designations are notoriously fluid, however (Phadi and Cerruti 2011). Far more commonly, and more significantly, awareness of class emerged through their descriptions of everyday life and how this is affected by limited access to material and cultural resources. In this rather broad sense, class certainly has been, and continues to be, important in shaping the students sense of the world and certainly informs how they talk about education and their lives.

The struggle to overcome these restrictions and inequalities was a very common theme in the interviews with the main cohort and largely absent in the interviews with the middle-class students in Ireland. There was also a very strong association of class with place and the interviewees frequently used geographical signifiers to discuss class inequality. For example, coming from a certain area or being from a council-owned 'block of flats' was used

as shorthand and a way of contrasting the reality of living in a working-class area with what is typically encountered in a wealthier district. This sense of place was often connected to the feeling that until recently, as Eithne put it, 'all avenues are closed to you if you come from the wrong end of town'. The accounts of paid work also differed according to class position: mature working-class students frequently discussed a lack of autonomy within routine jobs, restricted opportunities for development and promotion, and having to cope with boredom, subordination and hierarchy. Mark, a humorous man in his twenties, expressed this succinctly: 'Always some part of the job was annoying or somebody in the job was annoying me' and says simply he came to college because he grew 'sick of doing fucking donkey work'. Subordination was also a key theme running through many of the accounts given of schooling especially amongst mature men. Being working class was also commonly associated with feeling out of place in middle-class spaces, including of course schools and, even more sharply, HE. For example, Kevin used to feel 'it had an aura, it was something that wasn't for the likes of me, and of course you never assumed you were bright enough'.

Kevin later said: 'Ireland to me was a terrible, terrible place. It was demeaning to be from certain areas of society. You were held down.' Kevin's sentiments were echoed by a great many of the interviewees and it appears that for many people class is not only associated with differences in wealth, employment, power and education, but also with the amount of respect and recognition that one is accorded in society (see also Fleming and Finnegan 2010; Sayer 2005). While a number of people did speak about the strengths of working-class culture which was associated with having a strong sense of community, being hard-working, caring for others, being unpretentious, doing useful work and being honest, this was not as common as narratives foregrounding restrictions and challenges. Notions of class pride and/or clear-cut politicised class identities surfaced very rarely, and while there was a diffuse notion of 'them and us' in many of the accounts it was not articulated in a strongly conflictual way. This may reflect the composition of the cohort (mainly from routine and unskilled jobs) and site of the research (third-level institutions) but there is no mistaking a marked tendency amongst the participants to associate working-class life primarily with difficulties and domination.

In fact in Ireland there is a marked ambivalence about class (see also Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001). While the interviewees' description of shared conditions, collective experience, common reference points and similar trajectories through social space reveals something important about the 'immanent structure of the social world' (Bourdieu 1986, 46), how this experience of power is internalised, framed and narrated is very varied indeed. Even those interviewees who readily described themselves as working class would then offer biographical accounts that included both class

identifications and dis-identifications (see also Skeggs 1997). We think this indicates the existence of quite stable class structures and shared collective experiences which, in this particular conjuncture, are usually understood in individualistic terms; class manifests itself as constraints which a given individual has to actively work against to be successful. Class inequalities – linked to types of work, cultural markers and access to resources, power and respect – have a powerful effect on biographies and the making of identity but the Irish data indicate that it is probably most accurate to talk of class processes and classed experiences than of trim and tidy class identities.

Similarly in England class is a dominant aspect of a personal identity and everyday experience. Kuhn argues that the class system in English society affects not only a person's material conditions, but also their psyche to the extent that '... if you know that you are in the "wrong" class, you know that therefore you are a valueless person' (1995, 98). While class collectivities have been eroded over the years, a working-class culture remains. This can be seen in relation to attitudes towards education. Both men and women in this study left school at the earliest possible age because education was not viewed as important whereas the bringing in of another wage to the family was valued. For the women, class was linked to perceptions of gender:

I started school in 1969. Girls went to school, just did it, then got married. You know, had a little job and then got married. So there's no encouragement whatsoever ... it was just the norm. Women just got married, had children and that was that. (Susan)

Teachers and schools made classed assumptions about working-class pupils:

... it wasn't until later that I felt quite resentful about the experience I had at school ... I just feel that there was a lot of potential that I had that was totally wasted because assumptions were made about me. Too young at the time to know but I do feel it came back to my background and my family and where I lived and that influenced how they treated me and that's why college never got mentioned ... I think the system could have done more for me. (Paula)

Jim had ambitions to go to university but he was confronted by a lack of support from both his school and his family. Going to university was not a masculine thing to do in working-class families:

I went to see the careers teacher and he sort of steered the kids from the council estate away from university and towards the steel works. At the same time at home I used to go and talk to my parents and say 'look I've done this at school ... I got really good marks for English' and they weren't really interested. Then I said about going to university and it was 'university what are you talking about? Your grand-dad was in the steel works, father was in the steel works and that's where you are going to go'. (Jim)

Going to university as an adult offers a hope of a better and more fulfilling life and a means of escaping ‘dead-end jobs’ or housework and caring: Jenny remarked ‘it’s just not my scene, I don’t do making coffees when you’re busy answering the phone and typing letters and your boss comes out and says, “can you make four coffees?”’ For family and friends this was often seen as class betrayal (Hoggart 1957). Karen experienced the following reaction from her family: ‘What do you wanna do that for? Who do you think you are?’ The adult students, however, did not see themselves as betraying their roots because they were proud to hang on to their class identity at university. There was no dis-identification as found in the Irish research or in Skeggs’ (1997) study. Clothes, the way they talk and lifestyle mark them out from the middle-class students:

I am not an ideal student in the way I look ... I am the working class dodgy geezer and with respect quite a lot of people here are middle class and they cross over the road from me. (Mike)

So in both countries class matters, and matters profoundly: it ‘affects how others value us and respond to us, which in turn affects our sense of self-worth’ (Sayer 2005, 1) and cannot be described solely in relation to types of employment (which of course is the basis of much traditional class analysis). Class permeates everyday experience, shapes biography and largely determines how one is located in social hierarchies. But although identity is shaped it is in no sense fully defined and determined by class processes, and how this is articulated is highly dependent on the socio-political context and the available discourses of what it means to be working class (for comparative purposes, see Lamont 2000). This, we believe, is why there are such the marked differences in the levels of class (dis)identification in the data which we think reflect the very different nature of class formation in both states. Class pride appears more commonly in England, and this suggests just how important politics and available cultural scripts are for shaping the collective aspects of identity.

Moreover, in both England and Ireland the specific way class is experienced and articulated depends on the intersection of class with other forms of inequality, such as gender, disability and age. We can see this in some of the excerpts from interviews with working-class women quoted earlier, who often talked about class in gendered ways. This was also very clear in relation to race: for example, Maria – an African migrant to Ireland who, like other interviewees, discussed class in terms of financial difficulty, domination and specific geographical locations and something to be overcome by personal effort – significantly also linked this directly to being African: ‘everyone looks at you as a refugee-as a poor person. They put you in this category’. Her self-understanding and actions can only be understood in relation to both race and class. Overall the data support Anthias’ contention that the

intersectionality of inequalities means that ‘classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on’ (2005, 33).

Belonging, dislocation and sectoral differentiation

When it came to comparing what the students had to say about being in college, there were also marked similarities in the stories: most pertinently what they said about the institutional culture of universities – especially elite institutions – which remain exclusive and excluding in both England and Ireland.

A high proportion of interviewees in Irish and English universities had a feeling of dislocation, or at least a sense of social distance, from the dominant culture in universities. James, one of the Irish interviewees, said that although he loved university it remained – even after several years – a ‘foreign country’. This sentiment was far more pronounced for working-class students attending elite institutions, and in some cases interviewees discussed going through the difficult and painstaking process of cultural adaptation of having to find the resources to close a gap which exists, as one young woman Niamh believed ‘because a lot of them are from nicer places than [me]’. However, accounts of feeling like a ‘fish out of water’ hardly featured at all in the interviews with students in the most recently established and least elite of the three case-study institutions where the research was conducted, where as one student put it ‘there are a few posh people here but they sort of aren’t. They don’t act it’. These accounts of fitting or not fitting in at university were often discussed as something which was felt as embodied and as deeply emotional by the students. This suggests that class shapes our dispositions and sense of the world – our habitus (Bourdieu 1984) – as well as the culture of HE institutions in a profound way.

In elite universities in England class issues are brought to the consciousness of working-class adult students through their interaction with academic knowledge, middle-class students, lecturers and institutional cultures. In elite universities they are in a minority situation and so ‘stick out’ more than adults in the post-1992 institutions. Those in the elite institution readily and proudly defined themselves as working class and saw class in terms of material, cultural and language differences. They therefore saw themselves as ‘other’ in relation to many of the lecturers and younger middle-class students. Julie, for example, felt that some lecturers were ‘very different from myself, from different backgrounds’. She was also conscious of her class position in seminars: ‘I definitely felt like I was in a different class to most of the people that I was learning with, that was quite clear’. Anne stressed that ‘The first couple of weeks I just felt quite down – just I don’t fit in here at all’. Feelings of not belonging led to a lack of confidence with their learning. Going to the library was problematic for many participants who felt unsure of themselves in such an academic space. Julie always felt everyone was looking at her and had to ‘push’ herself to go there.

In both countries HE has been changed through expansion, widening access and institutional differentiation. In terms of access and equality, perhaps the really crucial thing is that feeling 'out of place' was far more likely in elite institutions. While the students we spoke to found ways of managing these tensions, this cross-national pattern points to new class lines within HE across the sector in terms of institutions and disciplines rather than just in terms of the widely recognised differences in rates of participation (Reay, David, and Ball 2005).

Sticking with it: higher education as a valued space of transition

Despite encountering such challenges, most of the people interviewed in Ireland were enormously positive about going to university and regularly said things such as 'I love it', 'I am just where I want to be' (Elaine). Remarkably this did not diminish over time (much of our research was longitudinal), and this was even true for the people who left before completing and those graduates who were quite disappointed by their post-graduation outcomes.

The reasons offered by the interviewees for this were diverse but the most frequent were as follows: university education is a social good which has heretofore not been available to most working class people; it is believed that HE facilitates occupational and social mobility; the university is seen as a liminal biographical space in which important transitions and changes in identity are possible; HE is viewed as a powerful recognition space in which previous misrecognition and disrespect can be overcome; and learning and education are important activities in their own right which provide major resources for personal development.

Typically students would draw on several of these types of claims in making sense of their experience. A few examples will give a flavour of what was said. On entering university Terry remarked: 'The feeling was kind of indescribable. It was all new. I felt I was after escaping my old life' (where he was stuck in a job that he hated). Ger said: 'I'm doing this to further myself'. Sinead thought 'It was a chance to learn, to learn about myself [...] to be on an equal footing with other people – more mainstream people'. Rachel enrolled on a degree course to get out of badly paid and routine service work, and despite feeling after graduation that she is still stuck in a 'rat race' nevertheless valued the fact that 'it teaches to you empathise, to look at different ways and different lives'. Katy did not like many aspects of her course but was positive overall because she felt she had learnt 'We're as good anybody else. We matter and I think that's mainly it'. James said: 'I have learnt all these things-these things that have enriched me so much and made me a much a better person and made me open my eyes up to other people that I would have got wrong years ago'.

As we can see to a striking degree, HE is viewed by many students as a transitional space for the making and re-working of identities. This was also the case in England. For some it was also a safe space and a temporary space to escape from difficulty and deprivation. For Anne doing a degree helped her to be more confident in dealing with middle-class authority figures such as her child's teachers at parents evening because they had previously intimidated her. For many there was a sense of achievement, because they had proved to themselves that despite the struggles they had succeeded in an academic world:

I can't explain that feeling of not just pride but about being part of the University, that you feel part of something ... I'd actually come to the end of something quite brilliant and I should feel really, really proud. (Julie)

These explanations of the value of education are interesting and we think they indicate three important things: that educational biographies continue to reflect deeply embedded class processes linked to ownership and cultural power; that the contradictions between the reality of working-class life and new educational opportunities are frequently central to the identity and the making of biographies; and that HE is above all seen as a space of transition.

We know that the expansion of HE across Europe has led to a more diverse university student population. Yet on the whole our data suggest that institutional cultures and practices have not changed to meet the needs of non-traditional students in either England or Ireland. The research suggests that for many working-class students, study brings major academic, social, personal and economic benefits. Importantly, universities act as a transitional space in which a person's identity may be reflected upon, reshaped and transformed.

But while going to university as a working-class student may be appealing, it remains 'a risky business' (Barnett 2007; Reay 2003). This is true both in terms of handling day-to-day interactions and in terms of effecting more profound changes in identity and work. This is because there are still significant financial and cultural barriers to participation and success. Working-class students are very often arriving at quite traditional universities and possess different cultural capital and habitus to those of the middle-class students and institution and which is not valued or seen as equally 'legitimate' (Bourdieu 1984). Often the process of 'becoming educated' – of adapting and succeeding – can later raise issues of belonging in relation to the self, family and friends. We think the question of habitus is also crucial in thinking about the ongoing expansion and differentiation of HE. If the most elite institutions remain exclusive, the development of non-elite institutions within the system will not necessarily lead to greater equality, especially in a period in which there are growing gaps and polarisation in power, wealth and employment prospects outside the walls of universities.

Conclusion

Overall, we believe that the students' stories suggest that class processes continue to shape educational experience in HE. Moreover, there are numerous similarities in the way Irish and English students talk about class and identity in terms of respect, hierarchies of power and culture, income and differences from middle-class people. We think this is very significant in terms of the commonality of working-class experience inside and outside education. It also points to the need for theoretical concepts which can describe this multidimensional experience. Here Bourdieu's core propositions remain useful (i.e. that embodied experience in social space linked to relational differences in access to economic and cultural capitals is integral to understanding how class is reproduced).

Class is therefore important and central to the identity and experiences of these students and who they are and how they see themselves in relation to other students. However, their stories also remind us that class intersects and inter-relates with gender and/or ethnicity. As Skeggs highlights: '... gender and class are inseparable. The women never see themselves as just women; it is always read through class' (1997, 91).

Engaging in cross-national qualitative comparison has also re-emphasised the importance of thinking historically and remembering that class formation is also contingent on class politics and classification struggles. As Thompson writes:

By class I understand a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. [...] The notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship [and] the relationship must be embodied in real people in a real context. (1980, 8)

For example, data from England and Ireland indicate that the neoliberal demonisation of the 'underclass' is affecting how class is seen and discussed. However, historical residues of previous political and symbolic struggles over the meaning of class are actively drawn upon to make sense of things in everyday life, so in England a discourse of class pride means that there is less ambivalence and dis-identification than in Ireland.

We also see in both countries an interesting convergence in the politics of education. It appears through expansion of education within individualised and detraditionalised societies that the university is now seen as a specific type of 'transitional' space of agency and identity formation for working-class students. We also think there is evidence that democratic educational aspirations are feeding into – and being transformed by – a meritocratic discourse based on the promise of individual social mobility. But these transitions are in many senses 'risky' because of the enduring and sharpening class inequalities

outside HE and the excluding and excluding cultures of universities – especially in elite institutions – in an increasingly differentiated sector.

Important changes have occurred as a result of widening participation but HE remains a contradictory and highly classed space. The research points to the continuing salience of class analysis but also indicates the limits of simplistic and deterministic theories of class, identity and learning. Studies of enduring patterns of inequality have to be supplemented with accounts of what is going on inside institutions according to working-class students and how the interplay of structure and agency is creating a new type of political and social space within HE internationally. Ultimately, however, we think the discussion of access has to go well beyond inputs, outputs or even risky transitions; we have to ask whether we are reshaping the culture and practices of the university in a way that is commensurable with the needs of working-class students in general and whether some of the valued transitions achieved through education can be made available to a far greater number of people in the future.

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